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AMENDMENT TO THE CLAIMS

1. (currently amended) A computer implemented system for distributing in real-time, inventory data acquired from point-of-sale systems at any one of a plurality of ~~participating retail outlets~~systems, comprising:

(a) ~~a communication network means for sending and receiving data;~~

(b) an plurality of in-store systems ~~means for processing, storing, and communication communicating data;~~

(c) a plurality of subscriber systems ~~means for forming and transforming generating and processing requests for data; and~~

(d) a host system, operably coupled to the in-store systems and the subscriber systems, ~~means for processing, storing, and communicating data between a the plurality of subscriber systems means and a the plurality of in-store systems means.~~

2. (currently amended) ~~A communication network means as claimed in~~The computer implemented system of claim 1, wherein the in-store systems, the subscriber systems and the host system are coupled to one another through a communication network further including comprises a means configured to transmit and receive data between a plurality of said among the in-store systems means, a plurality of said the subscriber systems means, and said the host system, and means; and the means to transmit and receive data

~~such transmission means includes the ability to support a one of variety of protocols such as tcp/ip, http, https, etc.~~a transmission control protocol/internet protocol (TCP/IP) and hypertext transfer protocol (http).

3. (currently amended) ~~An in-store system means, as claimed in~~The computer implemented system of claim 12, wherein the each in-store system further including comprises:

a point-of-sale means device used to process sales transactions and generate sales transaction data and generate perform inventory control data at a merchant's place of business of

a merchant;

a memory database ~~means-used~~ to store merchant identification data, the sales transaction data, and the inventory control data; and

~~an communication means~~in-store communicator used to transmit and receive data in substantially real-time through said communication network ~~means~~.

4. (currently amended) ~~A subscriber system means as claimed in~~The computer implemented system of claim 13, wherein the each subscriber system further including comprises:

a browser ~~means-used~~ component useable by a consumer to ~~view, search, request, receive,~~
~~and access~~ and view the merchant-inventory data indicative of a given merchant's
inventory, in substantially real-time using said communication network ~~means~~; and

a virtual stores server ~~means-used to search, request, receive,~~useable and to access merchant inventory data in substantially real-time using said communication network ~~means~~ and to process online sales of goods or services offered for sale by ~~said~~ a given merchant.

5. (currently amended) ~~A host system means as claimed in~~The computer implemented system of claim 14, wherein the host system further including comprises:

a host system database ~~means-used~~ to store the inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data;

a host system communicator ~~means-used~~ to receive and transmit data in substantially real-time between ~~said~~ a plurality of merchants-in-store systems and ~~said~~ a plurality of consumerssubscriber systems, using said communication network ~~means~~; and

a data distributor ~~means-used~~ to process data requests from said subscriber systems ~~means~~.

~~Whereby, the host system stores the network address of each participating in-store system and communicates with the in-store system on the subscriber system's behalf, thus allowing the in-store system's network address to be dynamically assigned, shielding the in-store systems from~~

~~direct access by subscriber systems, and eliminating the need for subscriber systems to know the in-store system's network address in advance of making a request.~~

~~Whereby, real time inventory data is sent from the in-store system to the host system and forwarded to the subscriber system or stored for later access by a consumer using the subscriber system; such that the consumer receives accurate and current inventory amounts from merchant's place of business.~~

~~Whereby, the consumer is reasonably assured that the merchant has the desired item currently in its inventory and ready for sale, thus reducing the amount of time and money spent by the consumer in searching for the desired item and providing the merchant with a ready and willing consumer to purchase the desired good or service.~~

6. (currently amended) A method for acquiring, managing, processing and distributing real-time inventory data ~~on~~ through a communication network, comprising the steps of:

- ~~(a) providing a means to access current inventor data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data from an in-store system;~~
- ~~(b) providing a communication network means to transmit data;~~
- ~~(c) providing an in-store system means that transmits and receives data using said communication network means;~~
- ~~(d) providing a host system means that transmits and receives data between a subscriber system and the in-store system using said communication network means and, the host system stores data on a host system database means;~~
- ~~(e) transmitting current inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data from said an in-store system means to said a host system means over the communication network;~~
- ~~(f) indexing and storing the current inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data using said a host system database at the host system~~

means;

- (g) ~~providing a data distributor means in the host system that processes~~ processing requests for inventory data with a data distributor in the host system using said indexed and stored inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data in response to receiving a request for inventory data from a subscriber system; and
- (h) ~~providing a subscriber system means that requests inventory data;~~
- (i) ~~receiving a request from a subscriber system means for inventory data;~~
- (j) ~~processing the request from said subscriber system means using said indexed and stored inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data; and~~
- (k) ~~transmitting a response to said subscriber system means.~~

a' 7. (currently amended) A ~~The method as defined in~~ of claim 6, further comprising wherein processing requests comprises:

~~storing and indexing merchant's current network address in said host system database~~
~~means; and~~
~~using this address the indexed and stored merchant network address data to initiate~~
~~communication between said host system means and said in-store system means to~~
~~retrieve inventory data when a request is made by said subscriber system means.~~

8. (currently amended) A ~~The method as defined in~~ of claim 6, further comprising wherein processing requests comprises:

~~establishing a communication connection from said in-store system means to said host~~
~~system~~ using the communication network means;
~~providing a triggering means that causes said in-store system means to transmit current~~
~~inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data to~~
~~said host system means; and~~
~~storing transmitted current inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant~~

network address data using said host system database means.

~~Whereby, the host system stores the network address of each participating in-store system and communicates with the in-store system on the subscriber system's behalf, thus allowing the in-store system's network address to be dynamically assigned, shielding the in-store systems from access by subscriber systems, and eliminating the need for subscriber systems to know the in-store system's network address in advance of making a request.~~

~~Whereby, real-time inventory data is sent from the in-store system to the host system and forwarded to the subscriber system or stored for later access by a consumer using the subscriber system; such that the consumer receives accurate and current inventory amounts from merchant's place of business.~~

~~Whereby, the consumer is reasonably assured that the merchant has the desired item currently in its inventory and ready for sale, thus reducing the amount of time and money spent by the consumer in searching for the desired item and providing the merchant with a ready and willing consumer to purchase the desired good or service.~~

9. (new) The computer implemented system of claim 5, wherein the host system is configured to store a network address for the in-store systems.

10. (new) The computer implemented system of claim 5, wherein the host system is configured to communicate with the in-store systems on behalf of the subscriber systems.

11. (new) The computer implemented system of claim 5, wherein the inventory data is sent from the in-store systems to the host system, and wherein the host system is configured to either forward the inventory data to the subscriber system or store the inventory data in the host system for later access by the subscriber system.

12. (new) The method of claim 6, wherein the host system stores a network address for the in-store systems.

a2 13. (new) The method of claim 6, wherein the host system communicates with the in-store system on behalf of the subscriber system.

14. (new) The method of claim 6, wherein transmitting current inventory data from the in-store system to the host system further comprises either forwarding current inventory data to the subscriber system or storing the current inventory data in the host system for later access.
